

Statement of Chairman Tom Davis
Government Reform Committee Hearing
“The Alarming Ease of Access to Pornography on Peer-to-Peer Networks”
March 13, 2003

We are here today to examine a growing problem for parents across the country: the ease with which children can access pornography, including child pornography, through file sharing programs on peer-to-peer computer networks.

Peer-to-peer networks are Internet programs that allow users to access each other's computer files. Typically, people use these programs to share music, images and video.

This technology is booming in popularity. At any given time, millions of people around the world are sharing their files. Napster, one of the first file sharing programs, had 1.6 million people exchanging music files, before being shut down by court order because of copyright violations.

Newer file sharing programs have become even more popular. Kazaa, one of the more popular networks, has been downloaded more than 199 million times with 4 million users searching and sharing files at any given time. Unlike Napster, these newer programs allow users to download videos and pictures, in addition to music files, and they don't operate through central servers. Without a central hub online to filter through, children can receive images and solicitations that normally would be blocked. In addition the programs are easy to install and the electronic files can be downloaded free of charge.

This leads us to the problems we are here to examine today. These networks have become an increasingly popular mechanism for the trafficking of very graphic

pornography, including child pornography. We will hear startling testimony today about this problem. At the request of Congressman Waxman and myself, the General Accounting Office found that child pornography is easily accessible on peer-to-peer networks. Searches for child pornography by the GAO and the Customs Services on file sharing programs produced hundreds of pornographic images, more than half of which was child pornography and graphic adult pornography.

Also, research performed by MediaDefender, another of our witnesses, found that nearly six million pornographic files were available for downloading on one popular peer-to-peer network in a recent two-day period.

These findings are very disturbing, especially because file-sharing programs are becoming increasingly popular with kids. Research has shown that more than 40 percent of the people who download files from file sharing programs are under the age of 18. And many of these pornographic images are appearing on our children's computer screens -- *whether they ask for it or not*. Seemingly innocent searches for files containing images of popular cartoon characters, singers and actors produce thousands of graphic pornographic images, including child pornography.

I want to commend Congressman Waxman for bringing this important issue to my attention. We need to alert parents to this problem and discuss what they -- and we -- can do about it. Research performed by Committee staff has found that many of the tools available to parents to prevent access to pornography on peer-to-peer networks are ineffective. Also, many of the filtering devices within file sharing programs have limitations as well.

So, what's a parent to do? The current dynamic leaves parents in an untenable position: either watch over your child's shoulder every second he or she is at the computer, or deny them use, or run the risk of exposure to this disgraceful material.

The alarming ease of inadvertent, unsolicited access to pornography on these networks threatens our children. Period. We're not talking about bad language or simple bad taste – we're talking about ugly, graphic images that have no place in our homes. And that doesn't even include the child pornography that's just plain illegal.

Today we will be releasing two reports: one by the General Accounting Office and another Committee staff report. These reports detail the problem of pornography on peer-to-peer networks and evaluate the effectiveness of parental control devices. I would like to thank all of our witnesses for appearing today and I look forward to their testimony.